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WAS THE DU BARRY A BLONDE OR BRUNETTE?

DO not cry out against the improbability! I have seen it, I have held it in my hands; God forgive me! I have felt it almost with love, so fine and silky was it¹—and so soft to the touch! “I was able to touch this hair,” once wrote M. de Goncourt, who had the same good fortune that we had, “and I have never seen the hair of any human creature so completely resembling silk.”

Will you finally put an end to our uncertainty? Of what hair are you speaking then?

Haven’t you guessed that it refers to the hair of Mme. du Barry?²

The du Barry! Are we rather disrespectful, we, the judges; we, posterity! It is the revenge of history, and how terrible it was for the favourite who paid with her head the inexpiable crime of being beautiful! . . .

Was she really beautiful?

That she appeared to some persons—like the Duc de Choiseul—“middling pretty,” is a judgment too interested to have any value. She was certainly not a model of classic beauty, with regular features, faultlessly marked.

Without doubt one should mistrust

¹ Baron Jérôme Pichon, the ostentatious bibliophile, has related somewhere that he saw some hair sent by the du Barry to Lord Seymour, British Ambassador, with whom she declared herself infatuated; and this hair was blonde; this is an additional proof in favor of our thesis! (cf. Notes taken on the inventory of the furniture of Mme. la Comtesse du Barry during the Reign of Terror; letter of the Baron Jérôme Pichon. Paris, Auguste Aubry, publisher, 1872.)

² M. Noel Charavay, the very distinguished expert in autographs, is the present possessor of the precious object and it is thanks to the kindness of M. Raoul Bonnet, his intelligent and devoted assistant, that we were able to look for a moment upon this relic of a dead past.

posthumous admirers; they are unacquainted with disillusion, having only lived in a dream. Nevertheless ought we to consider exaggerated these laudatory phrases: “the most charming allurements of figure, the most delicate charms, the most delightful perfection of body and countenance, which appear to realize the ideal of the beautiful women of France in the XVIII century?”³ Most certainly she had an enticing figure, voluptuous lines, full of sensual promise; she who was to succeed in conquering the heart of a king—and of what a king! of a being variable and inconstant among all, of the eternally tired one, whose dark melancholy nothing could ever dissipate.

It is in describing her especially⁴ that our admiration will be enhanced in quality, while remaining within the limits that regard for the truth imposes on us.

Before proceeding to a more minute analysis, permit me to put before your eyes a sketch, an outline, but one by portraitists, who, by their calling, are

³ De Goncourt, “Mme. du Barry.”

⁴ Here is a passage from the correspondence of Horace Walpole with Georges Montague, dated September 15, 1769, which shows her to us such as she was at the time of her presentation:

“After having attended this royal banquet, we betook ourselves to the chapel where a seat had been reserved for us in the first gallery. Mme. du Barry came and seated herself below opposite us; she was without rouge, without powder and even without being dressed up, a strange way of showing herself, for she was near the altar, in the midst of the court and exposed to the glances of everybody.

“She is pretty when one looks at her attentively; yet she is so little remarkable that I would never have thought of asking who she was, there was nothing affected, arrogant or bold in her behavior . . .”

not flatterers, which is a guarantee of their sincerity?

In the daily report which they made for their chief, the police lieutenant Sartine, the inspectors made on December 14th, 1764, this note: "a young person of nineteen years, large, well made, with noble air and the prettiest figure; such is the young woman Beauvarnier (sic) the mistress of du Barry, who shows her in his box at the théâtre des Italiens.

Here is something that marks a date; it is the first appearance of the woman, yet unknown, who five years later mounted the steps of a throne . . .

On April 22nd, 1769, Louis XVI, who was still only dauphin of France, wrote in his diary these simple words: "Pres. [presentation] of Mme. du Barry."

Between these two dates, 1764 and 1769, are placed all the steps of an ascent, long and we may say wisely prepared.

The presentation of the favourite! What a calling to mind of enchanting decorations! An accident which happened to the king caused the ceremony to be postponed. Then the court was occupied with the preparations for the marriage of the Duc de Chartres and Mlle. de Penthievre, celebrated on April 5th, 1769.

Finally the day so long hoped for came: the Comtesse du Barri (sic) had had the honour of being presented to the king and the royal family by the Comtesse de Béarn.

At the presentation malignity had full play and did not fail to be used towards the débutante. All are agreed that Mme. du Barry came out with honour from the dreaded test. All the spectators could not refrain from admiring "the nobility of her behaviour and the ease

of her attitudes." In the rôle of a lady of the court one is generally out of one's element the first time one tries it: Mme. du Barry filled it "as if she had been long accustomed to it." Thus speaks a novelist; but little is wanting that all the witnesses of the memorable scene had the same indulgence. How, for instance, will she be judged by the women? It will be curious to know the impression of one of them, usually malevolent, it is true.

Mme. de Genlis, who codified etiquette and whose judgment on this point constitutes authority, finds nothing to attack: the laws of etiquette have been scrupulously observed. In making the three bows of adieu the newly admitted woman is not embarrassed like many others by the immense train of her dress. The bow was as gracious as could be wished and the pupil of the dancing master, Vestris, has very well profited by her lessons.

But our malicious tattler is about to catch up with the subject again. The stroke of paw is well directed and the pretty face will bear the trace of claws:

"In the daytime," continues Mme. de Genlis, "her face was faded and spots of redness spoiled her complexion. Her behaviour was of a disgusting boldness. Her features were not beautiful but she had blonde hair of a charming tint, fine teeth and an agreeable expression; she had much brilliance in the light."¹

Blonde hair, you have rightly read; this is a piece of evidence to note, the first according to date. We, however, are going to see it confirmed by other well-known contemporaries, which will permit us later to draw some very definite conclusions.

¹ Memoirs of Mme. de Genlis.

Superfluous trouble! we are told. Not so sure of that. There are still those who pretend that Mme. du Barry was a brunette¹ and it is for them that a demonstration, backed by arguments, is necessary.... Should it not, in fact, be believed that it concerns one of the gravest utterances?

You doubtless know the delightful picture due to the pen of those enchanting masters of style that the Goncourts are. Besides, we are going to reproduce it, for it is, we will show, rigorously exacted as to the particular detail which concerns us:

"Her hair was the finest, the longest, the most silky, the blondest in the world, of an ashen blonde and curled like the hair of a child.... She had, as a charming contrast, brown eyebrows and recurring brown eyelashes almost curling around her blue eyes....

It is thus that she has been seen by all those who had the favour of approaching the du Barry and, whatever their previous idea, they all agree at least on this point.

The Prince de Ligne, that clever observer who was also a gentleman of taste, represents her as "large, well made, delightfully blonde, with high forehead, fine eyes, prepossessing eyebrows, oval countenance, with little marks on her cheeks to render her piquant as no one else is; aquiline nose, mouth with a nimble smile, fine skin."

She was not very large, according to the report of a person whom, when young, Mme. du Barry had embraced.² We have on this point a precise indication: "Height 5 feet 2 inches" we

¹ In the course of an article published in the newspaper, the *Temps*, M. Lenotre has spoken of the black hair of the du Barry; we will show from what his mistake is derived.

² Vatel, *Histoire de Mme. du Barry*, ii, 361.

read on the registry of the jail book of Sainte Pélagie.

"Hair and eyebrows chestnut," affirms the same document. "Chestnut," that lends itself to controversy. There is the light chestnut and the dark chestnut; chestnut which approaches blonde and that which is almost confounded with brown. The most authentic biographer of Mme. du Barry leans towards the first hypothesis. "She had," writes Vatel, "hair blonde or rather very light chestnut, not of that shade usual among girls of the North but of the tone golden and warm of the blondes of the South. All the eye-witnesses are unanimous in proclaiming the luxurious superabundance of her hair which was one of the advantages of her beauty that she took care of most and to which she knew how to give the best care, whether she wore her hair raised up in rolls on her head according to the fashion of 1769, hanging down over her shoulders as in 1789, or curled in front as in the posthumous portrait by Condé (1794) after Cosway."

It is doubtless in a spirit of conciliation that Vatel, whose opinion we have just reproduced, gives to his heroine light chestnut hair; for ourselves we remain convinced that it was blonde, ashen blonde, and we are in agreement on this point with contemporaries themselves.

Mme. Vigée Le Brun, who has published or rather inspired "Recollections" on the events in which she mingled, had access to and was quite close to Mme. du Barry, whom she painted from life several times. Now, this is how she relates her first interview with her.

"It was in 1786 that I went for the

first time to Louveciennes, where I had promised to paint Mme. du Barry, and I was extremely curious to see this favourite, of whom I had so often heard speak. Mme. du Barry might have been then about 45 years old. She was large without being too much so; she was plump, the throat a little thick, but was very pretty;¹ her countenance was still charming, her features regular and graceful; her hair was ash-coloured and curled like those of a child; only her colour had begun to be spoiled."

However debatable the authenticity of these "Recollections" may be, it is necessary to hold as true that which is not in contradiction to real and indisputable sources.

Mlle. Louise Fleury, wife of the actor Fusil,² who was presented to the fallen favourite almost at the same time (1788) found her, like the painter "too fat." But "the shape of her features is charming; her eyes are soft and expressive and when she smiles she shows teeth of dazzling whiteness."

Those teeth and those eyes have inspired a poet of the time, who was to be later—O irony of Fate—one of the executioners of the unfortunate victim; is it not piquant to see Mme. du Barry posing before the palette of the future aid of Robespierre, of the handsome and fierce triumvir Saint-Just:³

Those wandering eyes under their brown eyelids,
Those arms of ivory softly extended.

And that mouth both red and small,
Where the coral and the pearls shine.

¹She was very well made; that is an advantage that no one, even of the detractors of Mme. du Barry, has refused to her. She had a slender waist, well-developed breasts, perfect hands and feet, according to Mirabeau. At 37 years of age she was still very attractive: Lord Seymour, who was 20 years older than her, fell desperately in love with her and the courtesan was not insensible to this passion which, it is said, she shared.

²"Souvenirs d'une actrice", i, 70.

³"Organt", by Saint-Just (1789) ch. 1.

The characteristic of this lovely countenance, besides the contrast of this blonde hair with brown eyelashes and eyebrows and blue eyes, is, we say, the freshness of its colour; she had a milky complexion and a rosy skin and that was natural to her, for she did not use either powder or rouge.

A eulogist who is not a flatterer confirms it in the following verses which were presented to the favourite, of whom a painter, probably Drouais, had just finished the portrait:

To paint du Barry without the aid of art
One needs the finest tint, a colour without tinsel,
The bearing without preparation, the waist fine
and slight,
The appearance grand, majestic; the smile noble
and modest.⁴

She had nevertheless at a certain period a tendency to pimples and it was to combat it that she took daily a cold bath and only wore very light clothes both summer and winter. In winter under a long pelisse she only wore her chemise and a night dress of batiste; in summer, gowns or peignoirs of percale or of white muslin, as the heat was so disadvantageous to her. No matter what the weather was, she used to walk in the open air for several hours daily, thinking that exercise healthful and calculated to dissipate her red spots. It has been hinted that she may have been marred by some unclean affection that rendered contact with her dangerous; it was, on the contrary, an exuberance of health that exuded from all her pores. It was this freshness that made her especially attractive, for she was not pretty in the true sense of the word. The emperor Joseph II., who came to France in 1777 felt a real deception. On the

⁴Mercurie de France, March, 1770.



Mme. Du Barry

By Drouais

strength of rumours he expected to find a Greek beauty, with oval features regularly traced and after having talked a long time with the fallen favourite, while going away enchanted, he let it be understood that he thought she had a prettier face.¹

That she did not have the cold and severe beauty of Marie Antoinette, with whom she is sometimes compared, I do not deny; but she had such a power of attraction that she could struggle to advantage with the Queen.

It has been pretended, apropos of this, that Louis XV., found the Dauphiness so charming that Mme. du Barry took offence at it; and this, it is said, was not one of the least causes of the hate that the favourite cherished towards Marie Antoinette. This is not the place to do justice to such a ridiculous tale, which will not bear examination; let us merely say that Mme. du Barry used much diplomacy to gain the good will of Marie Antoinette and that she succeeded, if not in inspiring her with sympathy, at least in diminishing her insurmountable aversion.

Since the name of Louis XV. has come from my pen, perhaps one will be curious to learn which of the charms of the favourite the old King prized the most? These were the four marks which embellished her graceful countenance and which he often covered with kisses: one above the right eyebrow, another below the left eye, a third near the right nostril and the fourth below the lip on the left.

Of all these marks the jail register notes only one, that which was located "below the left eye." That certainly is not of great importance; at the least it

shows want of observation. If it is inexact on this point, the indication may be equally erroneous as to the colour of the hair, which the author of the document declares to be chestnut, whereas I think I have sufficiently established the fact that it was blonde.²

Here, moreover, is a document which, of its kind, is authoritative and ought to put an end to all discussion: it is the passport delivered to Mme. du Barry on March 17th, 1793, on her return from London where she had gone on account of the theft of her jewels.

French Republic
In the name of the law.

Department of the Pas de Calais, district and municipality of Calais (No. 4829).

Allow to pass the citizeness Devaubergnier Du-barri, French, domiciled at Louveciennes, municipality of Louveciennes, district of Versailles, department of the Seine et Oise,

Aged, forty years
Height, five feet one inch
Hair, blonde (sic)
Eyebrows, chestnut
Eyes, blue (sic)
Nose, well made
Mouth, medium
Chin, round
Forehead, ordinary
Face, oval and full

and give her aid and assistance, etc.³

In the presence of such a formal document, it seems that no doubt ought to remain; and nevertheless, as some historians, precise to the minutiae in their accounts, maintain an opinion diametrically opposed to mine, they must have their reasons; we think we have found whence they have drawn the material for their belief.

Those who maintain with M. G.

² Is additional evidence desired? Here is the statement made for M. Vatel, the biographer of Mme. du Barry, by a lady Sylvestre, 93 years old: "I knew Mme. du Barry well. She was a large blonde woman, having superb hair which curled naturally." Vatel, *Histoire de Mme. du Barry*, iii, 428.

³ Vatel, iii, 189.

Lenotre that Mme. du Barry did not have blonde hair, may rely, besides the declaration of the jail register, on a passport given at Marly in which it is said that she had chestnut hair.

But there is not yet question of black hair; I will get there.

I have only found one piece of evidence—only one—and it is very much a matter of caution¹—in favour of the thesis sustained by my sympathetic and distinguished opponent.

This is a narration taken from the newspaper, the *New Minerva*, which gives the most circumstantial details of the execution of the du Barry. I only quote this short extract:

“Being then between 42 and 43 years old only” (she was in reality a little more than fifty years old, having been born on August 19th, 1743—although the indictment says she was 42 years old) “her face, in spite of the profound terror which altered the features, was

¹ The story of the death of Mme. du Barry, taken from the newspaper, the *New Minerva*, ought to be consulted with the mistrust that is deserved by an eyewitness who saw the black hair of Mme. du Barry. (De Goncourt, “La du Barry”, Paris, 1878, p. 318, note.)

still remarkably beautiful. Entirely clothed in white, like Marie Antoinette who some weeks before had preceded her on the same route, her hair of the most beautiful black², formed a contrast like that which is presented by the funeral cloth thrown over a coffin³.

The narrator, has, it is very evident, sought effect; moved by this desire, he has merely exaggerated the account. Chestnut hair or ashen blonde would not have been set forth well in this frame of dazzling whiteness. And that is how the portrait was turned to black! Moreover, the execution took place as night was falling: the eye witness may very easily not have been able to see clear.

Testis unus, testis nullus, says an old axiom of jurisprudence. One unique witness cannot in any kind of case prevail against the numerous proofs that we have accumulated. The case appears to us to be heard.

DR. CABANÈS (*In Historia*)

² Had she found a means of dyeing it. The thing is not absolutely improbable.

³ Le Roi, “Curiosités Historiques”, etc. (Paris, 1864, p. 354.)